Before the mass destruction of the Jews began, all the Russian politruks [Communist Party members] and political commissars were killed in almost every camp during 1941 and 1942. According to the secret order given by Hitler, the Einsatzgruppe [special troops of the SS] searched for and picked up the Russian politruks and commissars from all the POW camps. They transferred all they found to the nearest concentration camp for liquidation. The reason for this action was given as follows: the Russians were murdering any German soldier who was a member of the Nazi Party, especially SS members. Also, the political section of the Red Army had a standing order to cause unrest in every way in any POW camp or places where the POWs worked. If they were caught or imprisoned, they were instructed to perform acts of sabotage. This is why these political officials of the Red Army were sent to Auschwitz for liquidation. The first small transports were shot by firing squads of SS soldiers.

While I was on an official trip, my second in command, Camp Commander Fritzsch, experimented with gas for these killings. He used a gas called Cyclon B, prussic acid,¹ which was often used as an insecticide in

¹. “The gas [Cyclon B] was manufactured by the Dessauer Works for Sugar and Chemical Industry and distributed by the German Corporation for Combating Vermin [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schädlingsbekämpfung m.b.H.—Degesch], whose managing director was Dr. Gerhard Peters. The Cyclon-B was used for fumigating ships, army posts, and camps, as well as for the killings in Auschwitz . . . Specific quantities within the allocation of the gas were ordered by the SS Economics Administrative Main Office’s Group D, located in Oranienburg and headed by SS Brigadier General Richard Glücks.” Documents of Destruction, edited by Raoul Hilberg, 1971, p. 219.

Hydrocyanic acid—HCN—(prussic acid) is a highly volatile, poisonous liquid used for fumigation and for case-hardening iron and steel. It is also used in electroplating. The German Cyclon B was a mixture of this acid with diatomaceous earth creating the blue crystalline substance so often described. The containers were airtight because the crystals sublimated into gas, that is, went from their solid state to a gas upon contact with air. The rate of sublimation depended on temperature and humidity. Lower temperature and high humidity cause the process of sublimation to be considerably slowed. Water hydrolyzes the gas, since it is miscible (dissolves) in water. Therefore, a spray of water, preferably slightly acidic, would neutralize the gas. “Treatise on Inorganic Chemistry,” Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology.
the camp to exterminate lice and vermin. There was always a supply on hand. When I returned Fritzsch reported to me about how he had used the gas. We used it again to kill the next transport.

The gassing was carried out in the basement of Block 11. I viewed the killings wearing a gas mask for protection. Death occurred in the cramped-full cells immediately after the gas was thrown in. Only a brief choking outcry and it was all over.² This first gassing of people did not really sink into my mind. Perhaps I was much too impressed by the whole procedure.

I remember well and was much more impressed by the gassing of nine hundred Russians which occurred soon afterwards in the old crematory because the use of Block 11 caused too many problems. While the unloading took place, several holes were simply punched from above through the earth and concrete ceiling of the mortuary. The Russians had to undress in the antechamber, then everyone calmly walked into the mortuary because they were told they were to be deloused in there. The entire transport fit exactly in the room. The doors were closed and the gas poured in through the openings in the roof. How long the process lasted, I don’t know, but for quite some time sounds could be heard. As the gas was thrown in some of them yelled “Gas!” and a tremendous screaming and shoving started toward both doors, but the doors were able to withstand all the force. It was not until several hours later that the doors were opened and the room aired out. There for the first time I saw gassed bodies in mass. Even though I imagined death by gas to be much worse, I still was overcome by a sick feeling, a horror. I always imagined death by gas a terrible choking suffocation, but the bodies showed no signs of convulsions. The doctors explained to me that prussic acid paralyzes the lungs.³ The effect is so sudden and so powerful that symptoms of suffocation never appear as in cases of death by coal gas or by lack of oxygen.

At the time I really didn’t waste any thoughts about the killing of the Russian POWs. It was ordered; I had to carry it out. But I must admit openly that the gassings had a calming effect on me, since in the near future the mass annihilation of the Jews was to begin. Up to this point it was not clear to me, nor to Eichmann, how the killing of the expected masses was to be done. Perhaps by gas? But how, and what kind of gas? Now we had discovered the gas and the procedure. I was always horrified of death by firing squads, especially when I thought of the huge numbers of women and children who would have to be killed. I had had enough of hostage executions, and the mass killings by firing squad ordered by Himmler and Heydrich.

Now I was at ease. We were all saved from these bloodbaths, and the victims would be spared until the last moment. That is what I worried about the most when I thought of Eichmann’s accounts of the moving down of the Jews with machine guns and pistols by the Einsatzgruppe.¹ Horrible scenes were supposed to have occurred: people running away even after being shot, the killing of those who were only wounded, especially the women and children. Another thing on my mind was the many suicides among the ranks of the SS Special Action Squads who could no longer mentally endure wading in the bloodbath. Some of them went mad. Most of the members of the Special Action Squads drank a great deal to help get through this horrible work. According to [Captain] Hößle’s accounts, the men of Globocnik’s extermination section drank tremendous quantities of alcohol.

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² Death is caused by the cyanide gas combining with red blood cells, thus prohibiting them from carrying needed oxygen to the body. Victims of this gas first fall unconscious due to lack of oxygen. As the body struggles to save the vital organs, it cuts off the blood flow to the extremities, attempting to bring the oxygen-full blood to the heart, brain, and other vital organs. If the victim is not removed or given the amio nitrate antidote, he will die of oxygen starvation. This explains the many descriptions of the Sonderkommando, who worked pulling out bodies from the gas chambers. They reported that the victims’ lips, fingers, toes, and even ears were purple or dark blue. The gas is noticeable in the air by a bitter almond smell; some have described it as a peach pit smell. Two hundred to five hundred parts per million of air for thirty minutes is usually fatal. Interview with Craig Skaggs, Dupont Chemical Company, Wilmington, Delaware.

³ Höß and the doctors are incorrect. See footnote 2.